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## The Sound of Brands

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this research paper is to both examine and conceptualise the concept of audio branding. Audio branding is an important part of the overall brand management concept and corporate identity. Strong brands ease the choice for customers and convey values and a certain quality promise. Branding is of vital importance. It needs to be acknowledged that only 0.004% of all outer stimuli reach the human consciousness. Therefore, audio branding is a way to further strengthen the overall brand awareness. This leads to an emotional connection with a brand.

This study strives to determine the characteristics of audio branding and to analyse the corporate audio branding of Audi. The result of this research study is the suggestion of the use of audio branding in a way that fits the overall brand picture. Otherwise, the brand communication is inconsistent, and this could lead to a misunderstanding of the brand values for customers. The analysis of the Audi corporate sound design might be beneficial for practitioners. The overall evaluation of the concept of audio branding contributes to the existing body of literature in branding.

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# 1 Introduction

During the last decades, the concept of branding has gained in importance for corporations. Strong consumer brands facilitate the choice for customers, provide a certain quality promise and reduce the risk of selecting a competing offer. Brands convey the whole experience consumers have with a company's products and services.<sup>1</sup> The promotion of products' and services' value is of vital importance to brands in order to make the brands more meaningful to the (end-)customers.<sup>2</sup> The diffusion of new products happens more effortlessly when a certain brand has a competitive and durable position in the respective market.<sup>3</sup> Brand positioning is reached by correct marketing activities, however only 0.004% of all outer signals reach the human consciousness. This evidence makes it more difficult for marketers to reach the full potential of their brands. 83% of all sensory perception is visual, followed by auditive (11%). Therefore, it is evident that the more senses a brand engages the higher the chance of being recognized by the consumers.<sup>4</sup> It is a significant challenge **to make the designated brand heard and understood** in an environment, where customers are bombarded with multiple stimuli.<sup>5</sup>

Several studies reveal that brand names in combination with music or sound affect the customers in a positive way.<sup>6</sup> It might help the consumer to recall the brand name faster. The **aim of this research paper** is to explain and explore the concept of audio branding as an element of brands. Audio branding is an integral part of a company's overall brand management concept.<sup>7</sup> With an adequate and consistent sound branding across the whole corporation, it might lead to a better brand awareness and emotional connection with a brand.<sup>8</sup> Audio branding has been a trend in marketing during the last fifteen to twenty years. Marketers have been using this concept to build brands. Despite this trend, the quantity of academic sources specifically on the concept of audio branding is limited. This paper aims to contribute to close this research gap and to increase the importance of the concept audio branding.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Keller & Lehmann (2006), p. 740.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Switala, Gamrot, Reformat & Bilinska-Reformat (2018), p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Keller & Lehmann (2006), p. 740.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kilian (2005), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wazir & Wazir (2015), p. 327.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Argo, Popa & Smith (2010), pp. 97 ff.; Gustafsson (2015), pp. 20 ff.; Moosmayer & Melan (2010), pp. 2 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Moosmayer & Melan (2010), p. 2; Nufer/Hirt (2011a), pp. 36 ff.; Nufer/Hirt (2011b), pp. 1 ff

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kusatz (2007), p. 50.

This research paper has the following **structure**: The first chapter is dedicated towards the introduction of the concept. Within the second chapter the theoretical concept of audio branding is studied. Furthermore, the elements of audio branding as well as potentials and risks are discussed. The third chapter is devoted to a practical analysis of the corporate sound design of Audi. Within the fourth chapter, this research paper is concluded and suggestions for further research are presented.

## 2 Theoretical Foundation of Audio Branding

### 2.1 Definition of Audio Branding

Acoustic brand management refers to the concept of audio branding, sonic branding, sound branding or acoustic branding. These terminologies can be applied interchangeably.<sup>9</sup> Within this research paper only the term audio branding is used.

The first development of audio branding began with a publication by Bruner (1990), who studied the idea of music in marketing.<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s, the focus was on music and how it affects human behaviour. Nowadays, the focus is on the customers and how they interact with brands alongside with sonic elements. The experience, that music conveys, plays a significant role as well.<sup>11</sup>

The following definition is used to describe **audio branding** within this research paper: "Audio branding is the approach of using unique, proprietary sound and music to convey a brand's essence and values."<sup>12</sup> Audio branding creates a sound identity for the consumers and therefore facilitates the recall of a given product or service.<sup>13</sup> The recall of brands is facilitated and audio branding has the function to further increase customer loyalty and to make brand values hearable and accommodating.<sup>14</sup> Most customers are not consciously aware of sonic elements. Most of them simply associate a given sonic element with objects, brands or products. Marketers make use of it, especially when a product is difficult to display in pictures.<sup>15</sup> The use of sound in branding also opens the debate about manipulation of customers in an unconscious manner. Practitioners might neglect manipulation, however it is important to also stress ethical behaviour in branding.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bruner (1990), pp. 94 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gustafsson (2015), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hayzlett (2017), n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. McKenzie (2010), p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gustafsson (2015), pp. 29 ff.

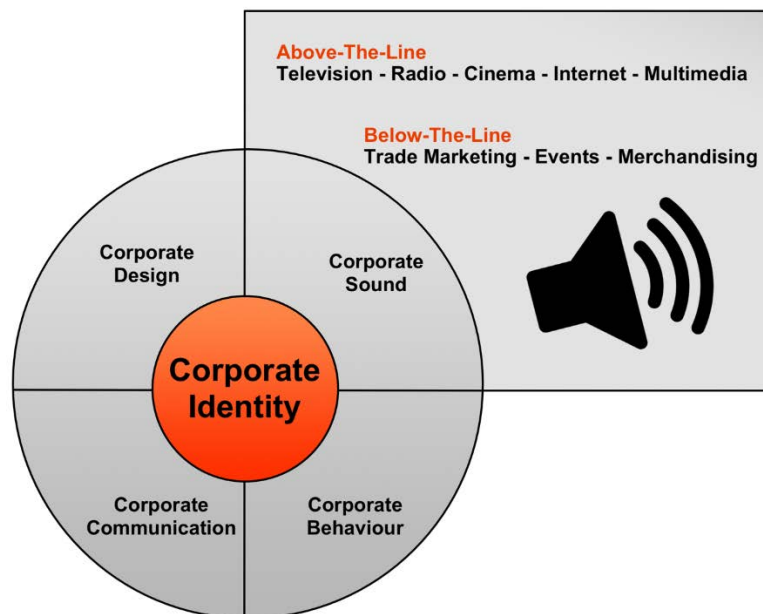
<sup>15</sup> Cf. McKenzie (2010), p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Gustafsson (2015), p. 23.



## 2.2 Development from Corporate Identity to Brand Sound

Each corporation has certain elements that reflect the company on the outside. This is linked with the concept of corporate identity. "Corporate image is the net result of the interactions of all the experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company."<sup>17</sup> Corporate identity and audio branding are closely linked together. As identified in Figure 1, **corporate identity** consists of **four elements**, including corporate design, communication, behaviour and sound.



**Figure 1:** Components of Corporate Identity

Modified after: Steiner (2009), p. 37

The **corporate sound** is further separated into **above-the-line** and **below-the-line** marketing activities. The graph demonstrates that corporate sound is omni-present and used in several areas of the business (television, radio, cinema, trade shows and events as well as merchandising).<sup>18</sup> In addition, it should be mentioned that the congruence of corporate sound (audio branding) and corporate identity is of vital importance otherwise stakeholders find the overall company image misleading. Consistent communication is the key in convincing potential customers to buy a company's products or services.<sup>19</sup>

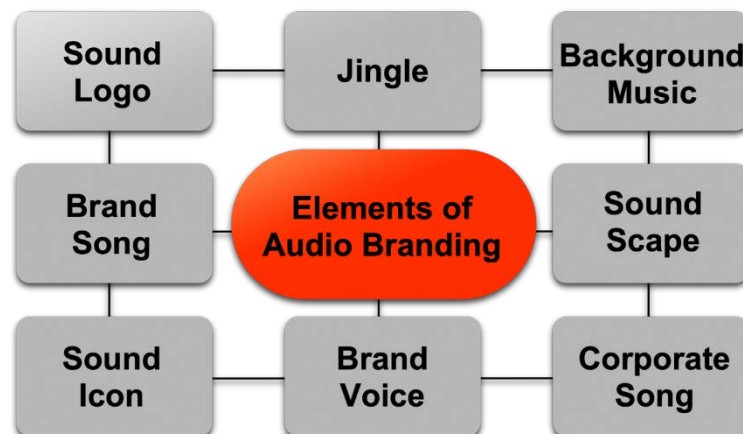
<sup>17</sup> Balmer (1998), p. 967.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), pp. 34 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Carron, Dubois, Misdariis, Talotte & Susini (2014), n.p.

## 2.3 Elements of Audio Branding

Within the corporate sound design, several **audio branding elements** are applied.<sup>20</sup> Each of the given elements, as displayed in Figure 2, has certain characteristics. In their core, the elements all align the core audio branding acoustics in order to make it consistent with the overall corporate identity.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2:** *Elements of Audio Branding*

*Modified after: Schwerdtfeger (2014), p. 29*

The following sound elements are the core of audio branding. Within this research paper, the **focus is on sound logo and jingle**.

### 2.3.1 Sound Logo

Sound logos, also called sogos, usually are in connection with the graphical corporate brand logo.<sup>22</sup> A sogo might help customers to recognize the brand name faster, as it has a mnemonic purpose. The development of sonic logos is led by intuition rather than by accepted advertising models. Furthermore, the composition of sound logos by experts is usually a costly undertaking.<sup>23</sup> Figure 3 gives an indication on the important steps to include when building a sound logo.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Carron, Dubois, Misdariis, Talotte & Susini (2014), n.p.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Schwerdtfeger (2014), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Krishnan, Kellaris & Aurand (2012), p. 276.




<sup>23</sup> Cf. Krishnan, Kellaris & Aurand (2012), p. 276.

No.	Description
1	A few-tone sonic logo is recalled faster. According to the study of Krishnan, et al. (2012), the willingness-to-pay of customers is at the highest with a 6-tone-sound logo.
2	A sonic logo is usually between one and three seconds. The sonic logo is concise in its form.
3	A successful sound logo is flexible and adaptable to different surroundings (television, telephone, Internet, etc.) and different instruments.
4	Customers should unmistakably match the sound logo to the designated brand. The sound logo must differ from the competitors.

**Figure 3:** Important Factors for the Creation of a Sound Logo

Sources: Krishnan, Kellaris & Aurand (2012), p. 276; Steiner (2009), pp. 40 ff.; Setik (2014), p. 18

Figure 4 indicates the notation of three sound logos as examples.



Company	Notation
RTL	
T-Mobile	
Apple (Mac Startup Chime)	

**Figure 4:** Sound Logos of RTL, T-Mobile and Apple

Sources: Steiner (2009), p. 40 (RTL), Setik (2014), p. 19 (T-Mobile), Fuhrken (2012), n.p. (Apple)

### 2.3.2 Jingle

Jingles are "...catchy songs about a product or service that usually carry the advertising theme and a simple message."<sup>24</sup> Catchy jingles have the general advantage of deep memorability. Furthermore, it facilitates the communication with the target audience. A famous example is McDonald's jingle "I'm lovin' it".<sup>25</sup> When customers hear someone saying these words, there is a clear brand association given. This brand association might however only happen after careful and fastidious communication over several months or years.<sup>26</sup> Strong, catchy jingles have the advantage of memorability<sup>27</sup>, nevertheless they might also hinder fast repositioning activities of the company, e.g. after a scandal. This would potentially lead to extra cost and time in communication work. Figure 5 contains some examples.

Company	Notation
McDonald's	
Haribo	 Haribo macht Kinder froh, und Erwachsene ebenso

**Figure 5:** Jingles of McDonald's and Haribo

Sources: Evan (2016), n.p. (McDonald's), Steiner (2009), p. 32 (Haribo)

### 2.3.3 Brand Song

An entire musical composition is used for a given brand. This musical composition is then embedded in the entire corporate sound design and the song will make customers recall the brand. There is a direct connection between the brand and the song.<sup>28</sup> There are two features of brand songs that can occur:

- Ordinary songs are produced to be aired on radio stations without a linkage to a corporation or brand at first. Then, successful songs are selected by corporations for usage. The company embeds the song within its audio branding concept and communicates it to the customers. When the customer understands the connection between the brand

<sup>24</sup> Taylor (2015), p. 717.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Taylor (2015), p. 717.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Ballouli & Heere (2015), p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Taylor (2015), p. 717.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Setik (2014), p. 21.

and the musical composition every time the song is played on the radio it is free advertisement for the corporation.<sup>29</sup>

- The other type is the exclusive production of a song for a brand. The company profits from the unique use of the song and the direct linkage to the audio branding elements.<sup>30</sup>

### **2.3.4 Corporate Song**

Corporations have the possibility to create a new song entirely for the corporation in focus. The other possibility is to buy the usage-right for an already successful song. This could have the disadvantage that the costs might be higher, and the target group could have problems associating the brand with the song.<sup>31</sup> A corporate song, similar to the brand song, is used for the whole corporation rather than for a single brand only. It fosters the relationship between the company members.<sup>32</sup>

### **2.3.5 Background Music**

Background music is mostly used in commercials to create a favourable atmosphere for the product or brand in focus. Background music enables the creation of images in the customers' minds, e.g. ocean waves for summer holidays.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, certain selected background music can be used throughout the whole corporate identity concept, e.g. telephone waiting lines.

### **2.3.6 Sound Scape**

A sound scape is a combination of several ambient sounds. The focus is on the environment itself rather than on the advertising message behind a brand. Sound scapes are usually instrumental.<sup>34</sup> This element of audio branding is used in entrance areas of corporations to establish a sense of well-being.<sup>35</sup> The corporation O<sub>2</sub>, a company in the telecommunications industry, employs spherical sounds in its television commercials.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Setik (2014), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Setik (2014), p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Schwerdtfeger (2014), p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Setik (2014), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Schwerdtfeger (2014), p. 33.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Westermann (2008), p. 151.

### 2.3.7 Sound Icon

A sound icon is the smallest form of audio branding. It can be combined with the sound logo or can replace it, e.g. the bottle opening sound of a beer in an alcohol commercial.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3.8 Brand Voice

The power of voice should not be underestimated. A single brand voice influences the brand, as the listeners naturally decode the voice for its emotions and information. The interpretation of that brand voice by the listeners plays a significant role in positioning the brand. Furthermore, it is important to employ a voice that fits to the overall brand values.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.4 Potentials and Risks of Audio Branding

When using audio branding as a core element within the branding strategy, one should also be aware about advantages and risks of the concept. In the following, the potentials and risks will be discussed. There are several other factors that either positively or negatively influence the success of audio branding strategies. For the scope of this paper two of each are selected.

Starting with the **potentials**, firstly, a certain relevance in business is given. There is an increase in the use of communication methods with sonic elements, however there are only few companies that record success with audio branding. As already mentioned, audio branding is not separable from corporate identity. There is no evidence that the success of given firms comes from audio branding alone.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, one advantage of audio branding is that (potential) customers are easily intrigued by music.<sup>40</sup> The transmission of emotions plays a vital role. The ability to grab attention is given as it is easier for customers to look away than it is to turn a deaf ear to an advertisement.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, an increasing loyalty behaviour of customers can be observed.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Setik (2014), p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Westermann (2008), pp. 152 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), p. 59.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Krishnan, Kellaris & Aurand (2012), p. 276.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), pp. 59 f.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Gustafsson (2015), p. 29.

In contrast, there are certain **risks** associated with the concept. A risk of audio branding is that the customer evokes negative feelings while hearing the designated brand. Therefore, the correct target group needs to be addressed.<sup>43</sup> In addition, a sonic element should be part of the initial logo development process in order to have a consistent picture across all channels.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, sonic elements should be used where they best fit. A company replaying its jingles all the time will irritate the customers in the long-run.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), pp. 59 ff.

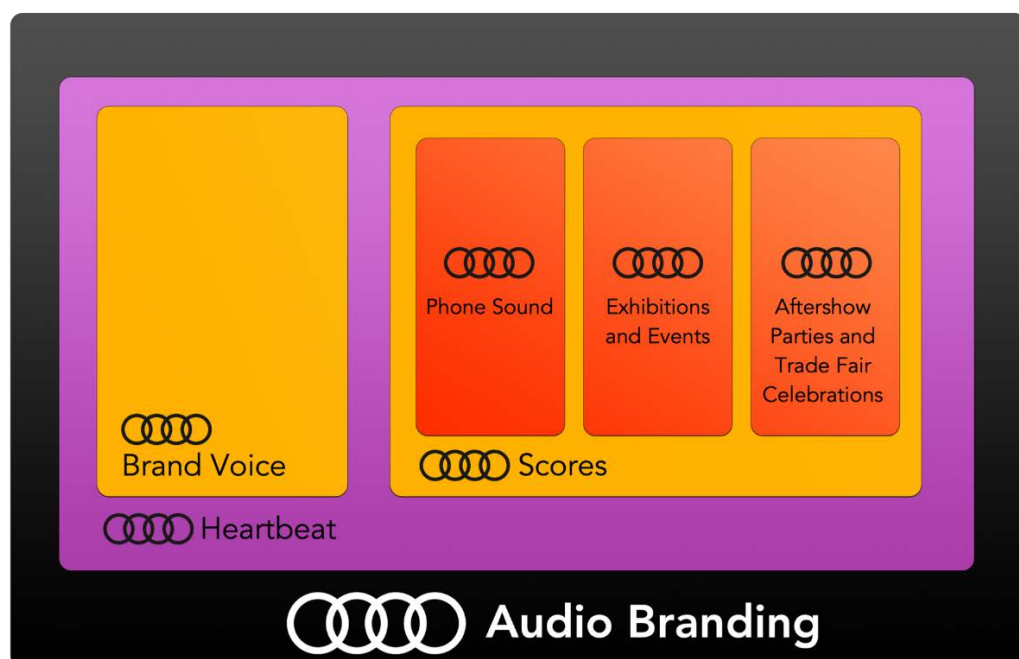
<sup>44</sup> Cf. Gustafsson (2015), pp. 34 f.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Steiner (2009), p. 62.

## 3 Case Study Audi

### 3.1 Audio Branding Concept

Audi advertises its new corporate sound as following: "Emotional and touching, the Audi Corporate Sound is fascinating and gets under your skin."<sup>46</sup> In 2016, Audi adapted its corporate identity including its corporate sounds. As displayed in Figure 6, the audio branding of Audi has several components that provide a unified sound of Audi. The core and the basis of its corporate sound design is the sound logo **Audi Heartbeat**.<sup>47</sup> The Audi Heartbeat is combined with the **Audi Scores**. These scores are exclusive musical compositions that are used for television spots or car presentations.<sup>48</sup>



**Figure 6:** Audio Branding Concept of Audi

*Modified after: Audi (2018), n.p.*

The development of the Audi Scores results into special sound tracks for exhibitions and events as well as aftershow parties and trade fair celebrations. The brand voice is another important component in the corporate sound of Audi. The brand voice, usually male aged

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<sup>46</sup> Audi (2018), n.p.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Audi (2018), n.p.

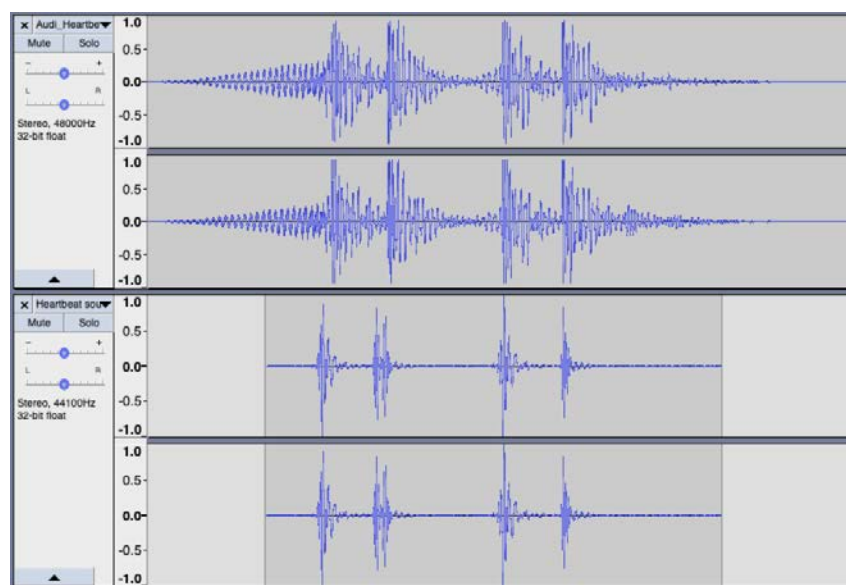
<sup>48</sup> Cf. Audi (2018), n.p.



35 to 45 with a pitch of medium to deep and no dialect, has the purpose of transmitting safety and quality to customers.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2 Sound Logo

The 2.2-second sound logo of Audi combines the core value of progressiveness and the human heartbeat.<sup>50</sup> This reflects the **combination of human and machine**. As identified in Figure 7, the sound logo matches the human heartbeat along the audio track. Comparing these two layers, it is evident that the core heartbeat is decorated with special sound effects that convey the values of Audi.



**Figure 7:** Stereo Sound Track of Audi Sound Logo in Comparison with Heartbeat  
*Modified after: Audi (2018), n.p., Justsoundfx (2013), n.p.*

For the analysis of the Audi sound logo, the study of Keller & Lehmann (2006) is used with data from the company Groves Sound Branding GmbH (see Figure 8).<sup>51</sup> A variety of criteria is useful in designing adequate brand elements.<sup>52</sup> The study focuses on branding in general, however the six characteristics are also applicable to sound logos.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Audi (2018), n.p.

<sup>50</sup> The exact duration of the Audi Heartbeat could be determined by downloading the sound logo from the corporate website, Audi.com (2018), and by importing it into the audio programme "Audacity".

<sup>51</sup> The data of the company Groves Sound Branding GmbH is cited in Steiner (2009), pp. 127 ff.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Keller & Lehmann (2006), p. 743.

Characteristic	Rating	Argument
Memorability – Is the sonic element easy to recall?	★★★★☆	The Audi sound logo is short and concise and is linked to the natural sound of a heartbeat. This facilitates the memorability of the sound logo.
Meaningfulness (Brand conformity) – Does the sonic element make sense for the customers?	★★★★★	The brand conformity is high, as it combines the human and technological aspect with sounds of progressiveness.
Aesthetic appeal (Frequency optimum) – Does the sonic element evoke pleasurable feelings?	★☆☆☆☆	The sound logo is in a frequency range of twenty to 255 Hertz, which can possibly reduce the sound quality of the logo in old TV sets or phones (the optimal frequency range is between 500 and 5.000 Hertz).
Transferability – Is the sonic element transferable to other use purposes?	★★★★☆	The logo is transferable within national as well as international boundaries, as the heartbeat is recognized by every human worldwide.
Adaptability & Flexibility – How flexible can the sonic element be used?	★☆☆☆☆	The sound logo has certain limitations in regard to flexible use in different audio surroundings as it has no melody and is short. It is a logo that perfectly stands on its own.
Legal and competitive protectability and defensibility – Can the sonic element be protected by law?	No data	No data

**Figure 8:** Analysis of Audi Sound Logo

Sources: Krishnan, Kellaris & Aurand (2012), p. 276; Steiner (2009), p. 128; Keller & Lehmann (2006), p. 743

### 3.3 Suggestions for further Development

The Audi corporate sound design is already advanced and the whole branding is flawlessly working together. It needs to be acknowledged that the natural sound of a heartbeat evokes the feeling of belonging between the brand and the potential customers.

Yet, there are areas of improvement, especially in regard to the adaptability and flexibility of the sound logo. Audi could increase the attention towards its brand when the sound logo is modified, e.g. for the Christmas season or special events. The core of the sound logo stays the same, however **some sound parts are added to make it sound newer and more adaptable** to different surroundings. The combination of a strong core and adding new sounds could result in a positive image for the whole brand.

## 4 Conclusion

Audio branding is a way to further **strengthen the company's values in communication and branding**. Several companies are already strategically using the power of audio branding. The concept of audio branding is directly linked with the corporate identity. Elements of audio branding are to be designed with the brand or corporate brand itself, otherwise customers could experience a misfit in the overall brand communication. The sound logo is one of the most-used audio branding elements. The sound logo should convey the perceived values of the brand and corporations need to be aware about the gap between the (outside) image and their communication strategies. The audio branding elements need to fit the target group, otherwise this would lead to a discrepancy in branding. Overall, the concept of audio branding is gaining in importance, also in academic literature, however, the number of studies that suggest an effective use of audio branding is limited.

This research paper has certain underlying **limitations** that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, no empirical data is used, and this paper is solely based on secondary sources. Secondly, within the practical analysis only the brand of Audi is taken into consideration. The special analysis of the Audi sound logo might not be applicable to other companies. Thirdly, this paper is mostly limited in geography as there is no evidence that the present research also works throughout other continents.

Audio branding is a concept where **further research** in academia needs to be undertaken. One could potentially study the reactions of customers in regard to different sound elements. Furthermore, researchers might benefit from a comparison between different industries. Lastly, one should overcome the limited empirical data in order to describe the effectiveness of audio branding.

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Marktorientierte Unternehmensführung ist eine Führungsphilosophie, die einerseits von den Anspruchsgruppen eines Unternehmens und deren Bedürfnissen ausgeht, um echte Problemlösungen für den Markt anzubieten, und andererseits die eigenen Kernkompetenzen zielgerichtet vermarktet. Die Umsetzung dieser Philosophie gelingt nur, wenn alle Unternehmensbereiche – und damit auch alle Mitarbeiter – zugleich markt- und ressourcenorientiert denken und handeln.

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### **Leitung:**



Gerd Nufer ist Professor für Betriebswirtschaftslehre mit dem Schwerpunkt Marketing an der ESB Business School der Hochschule Reutlingen. Er wurde für seine innovativen didaktischen Konzepte mit dem Lehrpreis der Hochschule Reutlingen ausgezeichnet und für den Landeslehrpreis Baden-Württemberg nominiert. Darüber hinaus erhielt er den ersten Sonderpreis für innovative Lehre der ESB Business School. Er ist ein national und international renommierter Experte und Autor zahlreicher Veröffentlichungen zu den Themen Marketing, Marktforschung und Kommunikation.

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